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British Cultural Studies and the Return of the 'Critical' in American Mass Communication Research: Accommodation or Radical Change ?

Communication and media studies in the United States throughout the 1980s have come under the influence of a body of British literature identified with the intellectual traditions of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, notably under the leadership of Stuart Hall. Indeed, the writings of the British cultural studies group constitute a significant contribution to the field of mass communication research, and they begin to represent the most decisive theoretical "break" that has captured the attention of scholarly journals since the domination of traditional sociology in the field of communication and media studies in the United States a generation ago.

The fascination with new ideas, particularly the continuing challenge of Marxism, the appeal of a European renaissance in the study of culture and society, particularly enhanced by its immediate accessibility as an English language text, and a heightened sense of criticism concerning current definitions of society as basic presuppositions for mass communication research, provide the context for the reception of British cultural studies in the realm of mass communication and communication scholarship in the United States.

Since a major problem of American thought continues to be how to mold its European heritage to fit the specific needs of American culture, the American encounter with British cultural studies may serve as a contemporary link in this intellectual tradition of re-creating social theories as an exercise in cultural exploitation, in this case, for the development of communication and mass communication studies. More specifically, this essay will explore the development of mass communication research as a problem of adapting and integrating theoretical constructs as they emerge from a continuing intellectual exchange of social and political ideas located within the specific historical context of a Marxist perspective.

There seems to be a specific interest in the exploration of ideological representations and the process of ideological struggle with and within the media, emphasizing the relationship between the media and the maintenance of social order. This perceived need for an alternative explanation of media and

communication in society stresses the importance of culture and cultural expressions and has focused on the work of British cultural studies as an appropriate alternative, although there have been earlier encounters with a critical tradition in the American social sciences.

The development of social theories in the United States under the guidance of a liberal-pluralist perspective was based upon an assumption of consensual unity, and reduced complex social and political issues of power and authority to an examination (and legitimation) of the dominant social system; that is to say, the practice of normative functionalism, including the assumptions of behavioral research, surveys, and the contributions of social psychology lead to the reproduction of the dominant view of society in mass communication research. Furthermore, the influence of pragmatism, rising through the social reform movement of the 1920s and supported by social research of the 1940s and 1950s, had remained a strong and persistent element in the changing climate of the 1960s and guided the expressions of the social sciences in the 1970s and 1980s. Its prevailing disposition was the result of an optimistic belief in the individual as a free and creative participant in the social and political life of the community. The promise of a place and a share in the benefits of the "great society" for everyone continued to be reflected in theoretical issues and practical concerns and produced a vision of mass society as a community of cultures.

The field of communication and media studies remained identified with the mainstream perspective of social science research. Based upon a pragmatic model of society, it related to the values of individualism and operated on the strength of efficiency and instrumental values in its pursuit of democracy and the American dream. Thus, conditions of society were defined in terms of individuals as members of a large-scale, consensual society and their encounter with the social and cultural order.

For instance, the persistent growth of mass communication research agendas, involving conspicuous topics like children, advertising, pornography, violence, crime and the media produced a spontaneous definition and extensive compilation of social problems. But mass communication research typically reduced its inquiry by isolating specific conditions of the environment, instead of expanding its investigation to raise questions about the role of the media in the process of cultural expressions and ideological struggles and about power among individuals, groups and political or economic institutions. Consequently, mass communication research delved into relationships among individuals, investigated questions of social identity, and, generally speaking, raised some doubts about the stability of individuals in their social relations. At the same time, there was a marked absence, however, of investigating the structure of society, including the location of authority and the distribution of power, and a lack of articulating larger, more fundamental questions about the failure of the liberal-pluralist vision of American society, including the failure of its own theoretical foundation. Although reform minded in the sense of understanding itself as contributing to the betterment of society, mass communication research remained committed to a traditionally conservative approach to the study of social and cultural phenomena, in which instrumental values merged and identified with moral values.

The 1970s saw the emergence of a brand of social criticism strongly related to an earlier critique of American society. These expressions had ranged from the socialist writings of political economists and sociologists during the turn of the century, to populist criticism of political and economic authority by publicists and muckraking journalists in the late 1920s, and to the social criticism of social scientists since the 1950s.

However, the introduction of critical theory as a competing social (and political) theory of society constituted a significant development in American social thought. It rekindled a debate of Marxism and radical criticism and signalled the beginning of substantial Marxist scholarship after World War II. The ensuing critique of contemporary American social theory and research practice also established the intellectual leadership of British, French and German social theorists. Thus, the encounter with critical theorists provided a solid opportunity to examine form and substance of an ideological critique of society. Specifically, the cultural pessimism of Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer together with the political critique of Herbert Marcuse and the theoretical inquiries of Jurgen Habermas concerning the role of communication in the struggle against bureaucracies and authority, provided American social theorists with an alternative approach to the questions of power, change and the future of society. Throughout, this body of critical writings exemplified an abiding commitment to the study of culture, including the complicity of the media industry in the ideological struggle, and to an analysis of the cultural process.

When critical theory reached the representatives of mainstream mass communication research in the 1970s, it had been a major theoretical event for over four decades, constituting a considerable body of literature which reflected the extent and quality of the modernist debate in a number of disciplines. The subsequent readings and interpretations by mass communication research remained peripheral to the field, but reveal an expressed tendency to appropriate compatible ideas. This practice of collecting and adapting theoretical propositions and practical applications for the betterment of society, disregarding cultural or political origins and ideological foundations, reflects an intellectual process of Americanizing ideas. It has occurred in the social sciences with the influence of European knowledge on American scholarship since the beginning of academic institutions in the United States, and is most clearly visible in American pragmatism (particularly in Dewey's instrumentalism), which seemed to acquire and apply suitable theoretical propositions according to the interests it served at the time.

Thus, to realize the potential contribution of critical theory to a critique of contemporary society, mass communication research needed to explore the rise of critical theory in the cultural and political context of Weimar Germany. Specifically, its attempts to replace the preoccupation of traditional philosophy with science and nature by shifting to an emphasis upon history and culture, and its acute awareness of the relationship between epistemology and politics, were decisive elements for such analysis. They offered the basis for an intensive examination of the critique of modern society, including a discussion of its philosophical (and political) consequences for mass communication research. Such inquiry, however, remained uncompleted, and a debate of critical theory as the foundation of a critical theory of mass communication was limited to sporadic contributions from other disciplines.

For instance, when Paul Lazarsfeld recognized the political nature of mass communication research and began to formulate his position vis-a-vis the reality of economic and political authority in the United States, he offered a reading of critical theory and the Frankfurt School which ignored the theoretical premises and their practical consequences (particularly as suggested in the work of Horkheimer and Adorno). Instead, he produced his own claims for critical research without leaving, theoretically or practically (politically), the traditional bourgeois context of the social science enterprise. The notion of a critical position ultimately meant a recognition of authority and a reconciliation with power; it also meant working with the necessity for change within the dominant paradigm

and arguing for the convergence of existing theoretical or practical perspectives. Thus, the "critical" research of Lazarsfeld is neither based upon a critique of society nor engaged in a questioning of authority in the populist, reformist sense of traditional social criticism.

Instead, it represents the repositioning of traditional social science research *within* the practice of what C. Wright Mills has called abstracted empiricism. The notion of "critical" research (as opposed to administrative research) becomes a point of legitimation in the development of mass communication studies. It asserts the neutral, independent position of mass communication research in the study of society and establishes mass communication research not only as a field (and therefore, as an administrative unit within universities), but also as a relevant and important *methodological* specialization of a branch of sociology, in which the priorities of the method become the determinants of social research and the source of research agendas.

In this form, the accommodation of a "critical" position within mass communication research may have served as a convenient strategy for defusing potentially controversial (since ideologically unacceptable) and challenging threats to the authority of the sociological enterprise in mass communication studies, including public opinion research. They arose from two directions: traditional social criticism, latent in social scientific scholarship since the turn of the century, and post-World War II Marxism, vital as a theoretical force in the explanation of social changes and the historical condition in Europe.

The suggestion of "critical" research as a socially desirable goal, within the limits of the dominant perspective of democratic practice, however, was a pseudo-oppositional argument with an appeal to a common-sense notion of criticism. It represented a successful attempt to create a false dichotomy and a confrontation of research practices without challenging their common theoretical and political premises. Subsequent endeavors of mainstream mass communication research to embrace critical theory, or appropriate certain aspects of a Marxist perspective, have demonstrated a willingness to coopt such approaches, rather than to rethink the position of communication and media studies in terms of the weaknesses or failures of their underlying theory of society.

Not unlike British cultural studies a few years later, the introduction of critical theory as a European critique of contemporary society was a political challenge and a direct confrontation between liberal pluralism and Marxism as competing theories of society; it also reflected the quality and intensity of an intellectual commitment to a critique of ideological domination and political power. Thus, the question of adapting cultural studies to an analysis of social and political conditions of American society is not only a commitment to the uses of history; it also requires an emphasis upon the ideological in the review of those intentions, interests and actions which intersect in the spheres of cultural, economic and political power, thus rendering a fundamental critique of the dominant model of society.

At a different level, the reception and assimilation of such distinct theoretical propositions and research practices raise a number of questions concerning the ways in which they are transformed into a problematic which can be accommodated by a rather distinct, if limiting, system of academic disciplines in the United States. Although this is an issue which has been underlying the study of communication and media practice in American universities for many years, the arrival of British cultural studies on the American academic scene has dramatized the question of disciplinary boundaries and academic compartmentalization of knowledge, including the construction and administration of appropriate social research agendas.

The arrival of British cultural studies in the research literature of American mass communication studies promised a series of immediate rewards, since the encounter of mass communication research with critical theory had remained a most difficult undertaking. There was a continuing problem with the accessibility of these ideas for the development of research, which had remained conceptually rooted in the traditional, sociological model of mass communication research. This problem was exacerbated by the atheoretical nature of mass communication studies, its relative isolation from other disciplines engaged in an exchange with critical theory, and, possibly, by an identification with a Marxist critique of society, and thus with a devastating critique of the culture industry, that excluded the potential for a theoretical compromise of sorts.

The work of the Frankfurt School had offered a comprehensive modernist view of the cultural and political crisis of Western society, which found a modest and eclectic response among communication and media scholars. British cultural studies, on the other hand, has attracted considerable interest and a substantial following. The initial response may have been partly due to a sense of familiarity, albeit misleading, with the ideas of culture and media research as significant concepts in the history of American mass communication research.

In fact, mass communication studies in the United States have had a strong cultural tradition, and a cultural approach to the problems of communication and media has remained a consistent and recognized theme in the literature of the field. Also, the idea of culture and society in the context of mass communication research in the United States has European origins. It is defined through its assimilation of nineteenth century European social thought into American practice; that is to say, by the effects of American pragmatism on the development of academic disciplines and their particular social concerns.

Consequently, mass communication studies have been embedded in the social science apparatus and surfaced with the social reform movement earlier this century. They rose to academic prominence and political importance with the recognition of commercial and political propaganda as essential aspects of mass persuasion vis-a-vis an increasing need for the mediation of knowledge in a complex urban society. The field also shared the basic tenets of the social sciences of the time, namely the belief in a world that is knowable through the application of scientific techniques which stressed the plurality and equality of facts, through the belief in the objectivity of expert observations and the power of empirical explanations. Since mass communication was treated as a series of specific, isolated social phenomena, it resulted in a narrow understanding of communication and in a conduct of media studies without appreciation for the importance of their historical environment.

As a matter of fact, in the past the American perspective on culture had been more closely related to a biological approach towards man and was less committed to emphasizing the differences between natural and cultural disciplines than the German tradition. This position was reflected in the struggle against the biological bias of Spencer's sociological methods which had occupied a generation of social scientists after the turn of the century and continued while the trend towards a cultural analysis of social phenomena gained ground with the coming of the Progressive era in American social history. A generation later, traditional sociology rediscovered nature, and under the influence of Talcott Parsons, embraced structural functionalism with its claim to move steadily in the direction of a theoretical system, like classical mechanics.

Throughout this time, there was hardly any disagreement over the suggestion that there can be no human nature independent of culture. The question was rather how to deal conceptually with the historical components in the examination of

social and cultural processes. Indeed, there was a strong movement among the first generation of American social scientists at the beginning of the twentieth century, which reflected a sophisticated understanding and appreciation of the German historical school, including socialist writings. As exponents of a cultural-historical tradition in social science scholarship, its most prominent representatives provided academic leadership in the critique of social and political conditions of society with works which were a direct response to the reality of their own age. However, in their writings they sought to reach an accommodation with existing economic structures and political power, and their solutions to the problems of modern capitalism were based upon the conviction that despite its failures, capitalism offered an appropriate context for the growth and success of a great society. Thus, the first encounter with the "critical" in the social sciences, and specifically in the study of mass communication as a concern of modern sociology, reflected more accurately the tolerance for dissent within the academic establishment, and therefore within the dominant theoretical paradigm, than the emergence of an alternative, let alone Marxist theory of society.

When the context of culture became a significant feature of the sociological enterprise, particularly with the rise of a spirit of collectivism in American thought before World War I, its theoretical position was a reflection of European and American influences. Under the leadership of pragmatism, social theorists focused upon the idea of the social, the role of community and the process of communication. These concepts suggested (particularly to Dewey) the potential of a democratic way of life; accordingly, communication as a life process would eventually and undoubtedly lead to democratic practice.

Over time, however, significant differences became evident in the study of culture and society. The German approach remained within the historical, speculative and philosophically oriented realm of academic scholarship. The American analysis of society, on the other hand, became increasingly empirical, behavioristic and scientific in the consideration of the individual, the role of communication and the effects of the media. Mass communication research followed the route of atomistic positivism in its analysis of democratic practice. Implicit in this direction of social scientific inquiry was an assumption of shared cultural and social values across American society. Thus, the spectre of mass society would also be conceived of as holding the promise of an emancipatory movement, involving all people and suggesting a triumph of individualism in an age of technology and under bureaucratic guidance.

Throughout these developments, the cultural studies approach to mass communication in the United States depended upon a firm belief in a utopian model of society. It was based upon a vision of consensual participation as democratic practice and an understanding of the exercise of political and economic power as acts of progressive intervention in the advancement of people. Radical dissent, including Marxist criticism of American society, remained outside the mainstream of mass communication research. When it arose, it belonged to the literature of social criticism rooted in rhetorical studies, literature, political economy and sociology, in particular, from where it was unable to engage the field in an extensive and prolonged debate concerning the foundations of social theory and the false optimism of social inquiries into the role and function of communication and media.

However, neither a cultural tradition in American mass communication research, nor the acquaintance with British mass communication research, particularly since the 1970s, when it had been favorably received and widely incorporated into the analysis of political communication and the study of television effects, can directly explain the success of the British cultural studies

group. Instead, the prominence of these ideas in the current American mass communication literature may be the result of a growing disillusionment with contemporary liberal pluralism reflected in the social sciences and humanities together with a rising radical critique of the liberal tradition in American thought. In addition, the field of mass communication studies has benefitted from a keen interest in the notions of culture and communication among other academic disciplines, which resulted in an increased reception of the relevant intellectual discourse concerning communication and the media from outside its own sphere. By now it has become obvious that the study of communication and the media is no longer the academic prerogative of one discipline, but the joint concern of several intellectual traditions.

Notably the field of literary studies with its curiosity about the process of social communication, including the role of the media, has moved freely among leading intellectual currents and created an awareness of British and Continental European thought and its contribution to the modernist and postmodernist debates. In the meantime, mass communication research proceeded with its narrowly defined task of investigating communication and the media as autonomous social entities, demonstrating the definitive and irreconcilable difference between the practitioners of pluralist functionalism and the exponents of an ideological approach to the processes of culture and communication.

Specifically, the British cultural studies tradition emerged from an intellectual climate created and sustained by a political discourse (as represented by the *New Left Review*), which operates on the assumption that the social and economic problems of Britain cannot be solved by current conservative or liberal socialist theories; instead, Marxism as a social theory is not only capable of explaining, but also of changing the conditions of British society. These debates, informed by the contributions of Western European Marxism, French structuralism, and the work of Louis Althusser in particular, continue to serve as the intellectual resources for alternative, political responses to the problems of British society, including the distribution of economic and political power and the role of the media.

British cultural studies belong to an intellectual tradition in which mass communication research serves a useful purpose for a particular, if limited, perspective on culture. Instead, the matrix of literature, literary criticism and Marxism produces a convenient context for the questioning of cultural activities, including social communication. Such contextualization and the location of the problematic in the cultural process, specifically among cultural, political and economic phenomena, provided descriptive power and theoretical complexity to the analysis of communication and media practice. British cultural studies also appealed to the critics of mass communication research with its provocative investigations of contemporary social problems, demonstrating a sense of engagement between political practice and theoretical consideration within the public sphere. This is a qualitatively decisive difference from a system in which the nature and extent of social research depend upon the relationship between academic organizations, economic interests, and the political system. Hence, mass communication research in the United States, with its primary location within the organization of universities, encounters the practical effects of politicizing research (for instance, through the policies of funding social scientific inquiries). In seeking alternative paths, American mass communication research may find the organizational aspects of the British cultural studies perspective in a climate of political engagement equally appropriate and useful for producing its own answers to socially important and politically relevant problems.

At the same time, the enthusiasm for an alternative explanation of communication in society, if sustained, cannot rest upon the good will towards British cultural studies and a calculated indifference towards the dominant interpretation of the social structure. Instead, a commitment to a critical approach, in the sense of a Marxist critique of society, will lead to a number of significant changes in the definition of society, social problems and the media as well as in the organization and execution of research projects. They are changes rooted in radical ideas, uncompromising in their demands for rethinking the theoretical basis of mass communication studies and innovative in their creation of appropriate methodologies. Since the traditional literature of communication theory and research restricts the imagination by its denial of the historical process in the presentation of mass communication phenomena, it must be replaced by a comprehensive body of knowledge, which locates the inquiry about mass communication in the realm of the ideological and explains the role of communication and the place of the media through an examination of the cultural process. As a result, disciplinary (and administrative) boundaries must be redrawn, with theoretical (and political) implications for the definition of the field, which leave no doubt that culture as a way of life directs the interpretation of mass communication in society.

There is always a chance for the return of the "critical" as an accommodation of liberal dissent, while Marxist thought retreats again into the shadow of the dominant ideology. In any case, British cultural studies as a cultural phenomenon holds its own interpretation; its language and practice are contained in the specific historical moment, which may become accessible to American mass communication research, but it cannot be appropriated, adapted or coopted without losing its meaning. The dilemma of American mass communication studies continues to lie in the failure to comprehend and overcome the limitations of its own intellectual history, not only by failing to address the problems of an established (and politically powerful) academic discipline with its specific theoretical and methodological requirements, but also by failing to recognize the strength of eclecticism, including the potential of radical thought.

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